Thomas Muir of Hunter's Hill . . . . . There's a Relative in Ladysmith

MARTYR to FREEDOM

Story and Photos by
CECIL CLARK

FEW PEOPLE HERE have ever heard of Thomas Muir, the "Scottish Martyr"; fewer still know that back in the days of Captain George Vancouver, Muir dropped in at Clayoquot, hobnobbed with Chief Maquinna, and finally sailed out again in the Spanish ship Sutil.

The Muir story is a wild and adventuresome tale with a cast that includes George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, Louis XVI, and a quiet, bespectacled, middle-aged Scot called Angus Johnston, who lives today with his wife, Gwen, on Hambrook Road just outside Ladysmith.

Thomas Muir was born in Glasgow in 1765, went through grammar school, university (Glasgow and Edinburgh) and was admitted to the Bar at 22. He lived in days of unrest, days that had seen the birth of the United States and a French republic. The violence of republicanism shook those in high places, as it found support among men like Thomas Paine, of Thetford in Norfolk, author of "The Age of Reason" and "The Rights of Man." Paine, an advanced thinker (and a bit of a rogue) fled to the U.S. to fight with Washington's Continental army, and also colored George's thinking. Finally, Washington, fed up with Paine's wenching and wining, turned him loose. Paine ultimately turned up at Napoleon's side when the Little Corporal (like another later little corporal) was trying to figure the chances for a cross channel invasion of Britain. But for Trafalgar, Paine might have been a sort of gauleiter of Norfolk.

Nevertheless his writings found echo in the minds of progressive thinkers, men who foresaw changes in human society. Men like the Scottish poet Burns, who was undoubtedly influenced. Like Paine, he had also been an exciseman. Paine once got in bad odor for circulating 4,000 copies of a pamphlet urging better working conditions for excisemen; Burns got in trouble when he seized a smuggler in Solway Firth and later bid for its guns at auction so he could send them to France to help the revolution.

Muir, like many others, was affected by the current need for reform and joined the Glasgow chapter of the "Society of Friends of the People," an English organization mildly aiming at a redistribution of parliamentary seats. Muir spoke at one or two gatherings, finally was chosen delegate to their Edinburgh convention.

THE FREE THINKERS were marked men, and as heads fell in Paris, Muir fell into the judicial net. Not because he spoke at Friends' rallies, but because he possessed a copy of one of Thomas Paine's books. While he was out on bail he went to London to see the Friends, then on to Paris carrying a protest to the French Assembly against the execution of Louis XVI. He was too late, for Louis was beheaded the day after his arrival. Then he got word that he'd been struck from the rolls in Scotland, and hastened back to arrest and conviction.

A handpicked jury and a biased judge (Braxton) sent Muir off to Botany Bay penal colony for 14 years.

He sailed from England on the convict ship Surprise, with 200 felons below decks, most of them pickpockets, and petty thieves. One was the famous Roger Barrington, a pickpocket who had plied his trade at state balls, and despite the motto "honi soit mal y pense" even picked a Garter order from a ducal chest. Only three or four of the prisoners were, like Muir, political, and they got a kind of preferred treatment in the Australian colony, with their own plot of land and a house.

Two and a half years passed, then one afternoon in February, 1796, the American brig Otter, Captain Dorr, put into the bay. When it sailed a day or two later, Muir was aboard it.

SOME CLAIM that the Otter was sent to pick up Muir at the express order of George Washington, and other U.S. authorities stoutly denied it. But it's known that Muir's father was a correspondent of Thomas Jefferson, and that his son had met Benjamin Kranklin in London, and Lafayette in Paris. Somewhere in this circle Dorr got his instructions.

Instead of taking Muir to the United States, however, Dorr put in at Vancouver Island, maybe to trade for furs. Whatever it was, they dropped anchor at Clayoquot on June 21, 1796, the year after Capt. George Vancouver departed after a prolonged stay. Also, by the way, just a month before the death of Robert Burns in far off Scotland.

ANGUS B. JOHNSTON
. . . adventure in the family.

The Otter, for some unexplained reason, left Muir and two companions on the west coast of the Island and departed for California. Muir's two companions disappeared, and Muir after being received in friendly style by the great Chief Maquinna, went down to Monterey on the Spanish ship Sutil. Some say he travelled by land to California, but the record seems to show he went by ship. When the Otter put in to Monterey that fall, Muir was already there.

THE SPANISH governor put Muir on another ship for Havana, where he was transferred to still another Spanish vessel headed for Spain. Just off Cadiz, two British frigates, the Emerald and Irresistible, gave chase and after a slam bang eight-hour pursuit the Spaniard hauled his colors. When British officers leaped aboard the capture they found Muir among the deck wreckage suffering from a terrible face injury which involved the loss of one eye. One of the officers recognizing Muir as an old school friend, immediately gave him first aid, then bundled him into a boat and told some Spanish seamen to take him ashore to safety.

THOMAS MUIR
. . . he felt the scourge of fate

When the longboat arrived at Cadiz, the Spanish authorities promptly figured that if Muir was befriended by the British, he must naturally be an enemy of Spain. So into a Spanish dungeon went the 33-year-old Scottish reformer. But not for long.

Friends in the Paris Assembly hearing of his plight asked the Spanish government to turn him over to France. He arrived in Bordeaux in February, 1798, two years after the Otter had picked him up in Botany Bay. But now he was completely broken in health and only lived a brief seven months.

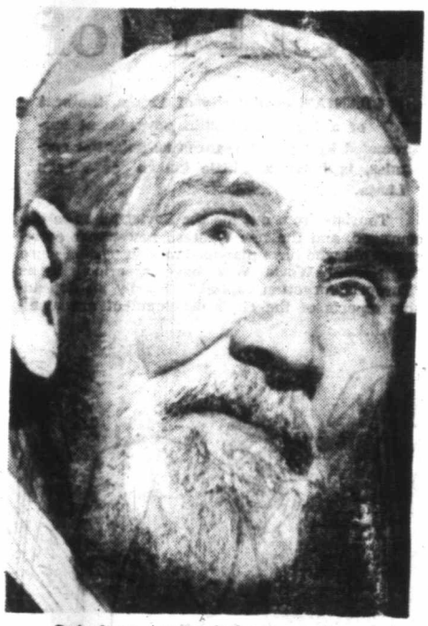
Buried at Chantilly that September, later his name was inscribed on Scotland's national monument at Calton Hill, Edinburgh. The name of his Glasgow home, Hunter's Hill, which Muir also gave to his penal plot in Australia, is now a well-known suburb of the bustling city of Sydney.

Thus the story of Thomas Muir, with all the cast assigned their parts. All but one, Angus B. Johnston.

I found him the other day in the composing room of the Ladysmith Chronicle where he's the foreman linotype operator. He told me that he came out to Vancouver Island as a baby from his native Partick, a suburb of Glasgow, and that he'd been 13 years on the Chronicle staff.

His link with Thomas Muir? Well, it comes about this way. Angus' father was Archibald Johnston, his mother Elizabeth Sinclair, daughter of Colin Campbell Sinclair. Grandpa Sinclair married a Mary McGill Muir (born in 1810, died in 1891) and she in turn was the daughter of Mary McGill and William Muir, who was a cousin of the man who came to Clayoquot 163 years ago . . . the hard way!

HE WAS THERE



Out from anonymity this week comes Colonist reader Thomas J. Dunstan, 85, of 851 Viewfield Road.

Born in Cornwall, Mr. Dunstan got his boyhood sea training 72 years ago in the old 19th century sailing man-o'-war Warspite; served as foremast hand in Australian emigrant ships; did a hitch in the U.S. Cavalry at Fort Riley, Kansas (1893) and was later in the South African customs service at Cape Town.

Soldier, sailor, world traveller and one-time antique dealer (he gave his name to the business building next door to Victoria Press), Mr. Dunstan chuckled as he read Cecil Clark's account of the Great Zodiac Swindle in The Islander of March 1. Chuckled because he recognized himself as the "Mr. Johnson" who gave the swindling firm of Musclow & Muir their come-uppance.